

Testimony of
Dianne Stone, Director, Newington Senior and Disabled Center

Aging Committee Public Hearing
2/25/2016

H.B.5291 – Support

Senator Flexer, Representative Serra and esteemed Members of the Aging Committee, my name is Dianne Stone. I am the Director of the Newington Senior and Disabled Center, the first Center in the State to achieve National Accreditation, and I express strong support for H.B. 5291 AN ACT CONCERNING SENIOR CENTERS.

Connecticut has made great strides and continues to invest in initiatives to rebalance the long term care system so that people have the choice to live at home. But, we know that people do not live in systems. They live in our Towns and Cities and there has been very little attention given to building local capacity. One notable exception is the work that the Commission on Aging has started through the Livable Community Forum. They have engaged natural partners, provided critical information and have facilitated discussion. With the support of the Governor and legislature, we hope that the Commission will be able to continue providing leadership in this and all areas.

In almost every municipality in our state there is a senior center. We have the potential to reach people where they live, to mobilize community resources and to provide programs, services and activities that reflect the needs and culture of our unique communities. In the broader context of long term supports and services, we are in a position to create tremendous impact by providing low cost programs, activities and services that prevent or delay more costly interventions. With this expanded view we must look at just what it means to age in place. Transportation, zoning, housing, recreation, social and civic engagement, prevention, wellness, nutrition, fraud and abuse prevention; all are vital to successful aging and all have municipal impact. They also cross many areas of State responsibility including Medicaid, DOT, DPH, DECD, etc. The efforts of these agencies, the nonprofit agencies that are in place and municipal services must be aligned and working together toward common goals.

They are not.

Connecticut is absolutely a state of 169 distinct entities and local aging services are entirely a product of the municipality. The CT Council on Philanthropy describes the issue quite well:

With increasing emphasis being placed on the localities, it is important to note that municipal senior services in Connecticut vary widely among towns. The disparity in financial resources, staffing and expertise, and town commitment to aging services means that municipal aging programs range from nonexistent to comprehensive.

[Statewide and regional entities] partner with local communities – senior centers, libraries, nonprofits and others, but, in some towns, there is nobody able or willing to partner. With stretched resources, [they] can't possibly reach all the seniors in their regions.

Professionals who are knowledgeable about local senior services in Connecticut note the lack of standards and models to help guide cities and towns. The state Department of Aging is not funded or staffed to strengthen local programs. Aging experts stress the need for system-wide thinking in order to bridge the gap between the municipalities and the state and area agencies.

In my work with the National Institute of Senior Centers Accreditation Program, in my work with the Connecticut Association of Senior Centers, in my involvement with the Task Force for the Re-establishment of the Department on Aging and the Task Force to Study Aging in Place, in my involvement with the Commission on Aging and the Connecticut Elder Action Network and, most importantly, in my job as the Director of the Newington Senior and Disabled Center, I am witness to both the great potential and the lack of standardization, systemic support and coordination of local services, especially Senior Centers. The State Department on Aging has established a liaison to Senior Centers and she is doing yeoman work within available appropriations. But it is not enough. The role and the potential role of Senior Centers in Connecticut is vastly underdeveloped and untapped. Through this task force, we will be able to identify a path to develop these resources, to harness the great work that is being done in pockets and to bring to scale the best practices that exist in the State of Connecticut.

I urge passage of this bill and commit to supporting its work.